



Call centres prove futility of focus on performance

In the Financial Times, Sarah O'Connor warned - *In the pursuit of efficiency, [call centres] have ground humanity out of their workers — the very quality they now want to get back ... If the problem is that emotionally exhausted workers are giving a bad experience to customers, then a simpler solution would be to prevent them from getting so burnt out in the first place.*¹

The results of this type of 'sweat the labour' approach for customers was accurately described by fellow columnist Camilla Cavendish in her article 'Press 1 for hell' - *"Due to coronavirus, it will take longer to answer your call." Who, exactly, are they kidding? A year into the crisis, some of the biggest institutions are still blaming Covid-19 for their monstrous incompetence and callow indifference. All those hours saved on the commute by working from home are now being wasted in the vortex of banks, energy and phone companies' customer services whose idea of accountability is chatbots.*²

The call centre quality improvement and cost minimisation efforts described by O'Connor and Cavendish are indeed destined to fail.

The reason for the futility of this approach was identified over 30 years ago by John Seddon, the British occupational psychologist. He analysed the reasons why people phoned public and private sector call centres and found that routinely up to 80 per cent of the calls made were avoidable. They were caused by failures to do something correctly elsewhere in the organisation. The source of these calls can therefore be permanently eliminated once their root cause is identified and fixed.

Call centres are therefore frequently rework centres patching up the results of faulty internal processes. Call centre contracts usually focus on cost per call, minimising duration and fast pick up times. But if typically 20 per cent, and as much as 80 per cent of calls are unnecessary in the first place, handling them cheaper or faster makes marginal sense. They need to be stopped at source.

¹ It's creepy that AI is teaching workers to be more human, Sarah O'Connor , Financial Times
www.ft.com/content/758e0a2f-3507-4b66-990a-73310d8f588b

² Press 1 for hell: Covid is a flimsy excuse for dire customer service, Camilla Cavendish , Financial Times
<https://www.ft.com/content/afd38f04-e022-46d9-bfbc-c19ea9aa2e0b>

Calls prompted by delivery problems, incorrect websites, confusing packaging, baffling instructions, incomprehensible forms, misunderstood advertising or other internal organisational failures are simply rework. Call handler empathy is not the tool for this.

Once the pivot is made from focusing on cost per call to root cause analysis of the reasons for calls, stunning cost reductions and quality improvements are possible. All that is required is for the Director or Chief Executive responsible to take a customer's perspective, and spend an hour or two listening to inbound customers in their call centre. Senior executives are astonished when they realise the money wasted and damage they have inflicted for years on their customers, employees and brand by focusing on worker performance rather than understanding and mending the root cause of the customer's call. What is needed is not artificial but applied intelligence to stop call centres being rework centres.

This article was first written by Dr Peter Middleton in a letter to the Financial Times

